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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000283

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SUBJECT: HEADSCARVES IN AZERBAIJAN

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A small but growing segment of Azerbaijani women wear an Islamic headscarf (hijab). While there is no ban against women wearing the hijab at government offices or universities, there are regular instances of local officials harassing women who choose to wear a headscarf; several veiled women report that they have been denied government jobs due to their headscarves. Sometimes these incidents hit the press and reinforce the perception that the government opposes religious observance. A heated December 2007 Parliamentary discussion on the possibility of banning the hijab in schools (ultimately dropped from the draft education law) likely was a GOAJ trial balloon to measure public opinion on this issue. (The hijab is likely to become a more politically-charged issue in the years to come, given the GOAJ's clear discomfort with signs of Islamic proclivity.)
End Summar.

Background on Hijab

. (C) A small but growing segment of Azerbaijani women wear an Islamic headscarf. Most covered women wear a simple scarf that covers their hair; niqgab, or scarves fully covering a woman's face are extremely rare in Baku. While there is no reliable survey data on the percentage of women wearing the headscarf, the Embassy estimates one to three percent of Baku women wear it. Given the absence of survey data, we can only estimate that there has been a slight increase of women wearing the headscarf over the past several years. Religiously observant women agree that the overall trend since independence is toward a slow but steady increase in the number of covered women. They also report that ordinary Azerbaijani citizens seem increasingly comfortable with and accept the hijab, although women wearing full niqgab often face uncomfortable stares or even verbal abuse from passers-by.

Rumblings of a Hijab Ban

¶3. (C) According to Azerbaijani law, women are not allowed to wear a headscarf in photos for official documents, such as passports or national identity cards. There is no ban against women wearing headscarves at government or educational facilities. In practice, however, employers and officials resort to unofficial tactics to pressure women from wearing the veil. For example, there have been several publicized cases over the past year of students or teachers

accusing local officials of leaning on them to drop the hijab. These incidents often are handled on a case-by-case basis in an unofficial negotiating process between the two parties. Young religiously observant women, who state that they were otherwise qualified for government jobs, tell us that they were offered jobs on the condition that they not wear hijab. Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu -- a long-time Embassy contact who is an outspoken civil society activist -- and his Centre to Protect Freedom of Conscience and Faith (DEVAMM) advocate on behalf of women who find themselves in such difficult situations. Religiously observant women report that Ibrahimoglu is the only civil society figure willing to take on this politically charged issue.

¶4. (C) One of the most politically-charged public discussions on hijab occurred in December 2007, when the Parliament was reviewing a draft law on education. At one point in the process, there was a draft article (number 11.1.8) under discussion forbidding students, teachers, and all employees from wearing the hijab and other religious apparel at Azerbaijani educational institutions. A number of local activists protested against this article, arguing that it was a violation of Azerbaijani law. After several days of discussion, Parliamentary Speaker Oqtay Asadov on December 25 indicated that the controversial article was not going to be included in the draft law. One veiled civil society activist reports that Parliament struck a behind-the-scenes deal that will allow individual school administrators to decide individual cases. Parliament has still not passed the education law.

¶5. (C) Aysel Vazirova -- a devout local Muslim who has done her doctoral work on the hijab -- told us the bill generated considerable discussion and concern among practicing Muslim

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believers. She said many believers interpreted the draft article as a trial balloon by the GOAJ to gauge the level of public backlash. Vazirova and other Embassy contacts have contrasted Turkey's recent decision to roll back the ban on hijab at universities with Baku's consideration of imposing such a ban. Vazirova told us that on balance, the hijab was a side issue in the broader Parliamentary debate on the education law; the key reason for the lengthy debate was government insiders striving to ensure access to rents collected from a variety of education-related processes, such as testing for students and licensing for teachers. Echoing this point, popular Yeni Musavat columnist Zamin Haji suggested to us that the hijab article was a red herring designed to detract attention from more significant amendments.

¶6. (C) Nariman Gasimoglu, the head of the Azerbaijan Center for Religion and Democracy, and several of his employees also told us that many interpreted the draft article on banning the hijab as a clumsy GOAJ attempt to test public opinion. Gasimoglu believes that at this stage, the GOAJ has opted not to ban the veil for fear this policy could trigger a backlash. Gasimoglu and other Embassy contacts judge that for the immediate future, there probably will be a continuation of the status quo, where the GOAJ does little to rein in individual school administrators from pressuring students or teachers who wear the veil.

Why Wear the Headscarf?

¶7. (C) Vazirova cautioned against the idea of directly linking a slight rise in the number of veiled women to increased religiosity. According to Vazirova, there is a broad spectrum of reasons behind a woman's decision to cover herself and much depends on the individual woman. For example, some husbands order their wives to wear the veil, some women wear it for purely religious reasons, while some women wear it to attract an observant husband. Some even wear the veil to appear religious, as "being religious" is

considered trendy among some Azerbaijanis. There is no reliable survey data on why Azerbaijani women wear the veil.

¶8. (C) A young woman's decision to wear the veil often causes strife within Azerbaijani families, according to a variety of Embassy contacts. We have heard of multiple cases in which non-observant parents, raised in the secular Soviet period, strongly disagree with their daughter's decision to wear the veil. Vazirova noted that from a sociological perspective, some young females in this situation are confronted with the difficult decision of looking to "alternative sources of authority" outside of the home if they choose to wear the veil against their parents wishes. (Traditionally, the center of authority within Azerbaijani society lies within the home and a circle of respected family members and friends.)

Comment

¶9. (C) The sheer lack of reliable survey data inhibits our ability to make precise judgments on the slight rise of women wearing the hijab and their motivations. Based on anecdotal information and Embassy contacts, we believe there is a slight rise in the number of veiled women. We believe the primary reason for this increase is the gradual growth of Islam among Azerbaijanis -- a process of Azerbaijan rediscovering religion that has been gradually occurring since the twilight of the Soviet years. The rising interest in Islam combines a mixture of religious and cultural identities, which are inherently difficult to parse.

¶10. (C) The occasional cases of pressure against women wearing the veil is likely to grow, given the GOAJ's discomfort with increased religiosity toward most visible signs of an Islamic identity -- particularly those that are not under the control of the Caucasus Muslim Board. These incidents likely will remain isolated, but they sometimes draw media attention, which reinforces the growing perception among devout Azerbaijani Muslims that the GOAJ is anti-Islamic. While only a thin strata of Azerbaijani society is genuinely devout, the impression is solidifying among them that the government opposes religious observance. A number of pious Azerbaijanis have pointed to the draft

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article banning the hijab and the May 2007 fumbled attempt by the GOAJ to ban the call to prayer as signs that the government stands against pious Muslims practicing their faith. Reflecting this sentiment, one believer at Friday prayers told us the GOAJ "grants religious freedom to everyone except practicing Muslims."
DERSE